

Constancio Pinto

Training The Oppressors

Recent reports that the Clinton administration has been secretly providing lethal training to Indonesia's military have a personal meaning for me. I have firsthand experience of the brutality of Indonesia's military: Its members arrested and tortured me on my birthday in 1991 because of my political activism, and its soldiers have killed many of my relatives and close friends.

I was 12 years old when Indonesia invaded my country, East Timor, on Dec. 7, 1975. My family and I spent almost three years in the mountains hiding from the Indonesian military. Until mid-1977, two-thirds of the East Timorese people were struggling to survive in territory free from Indonesian control. But then the Carter administration provided the Indonesian military with U.S.-manufactured OV-10 Broncos. These counterinsurgency aircraft allowed Indonesia to bomb and napalm the population into submission.

At that time, an Australian government report described Indonesia's behavior in East Timor as "indiscriminate killing on a scale unprecedented in post-World War II history." By the early 1980s, more than 200,000 people—about one-third of the pre-invasion population—were dead as a direct result of Indonesia's war.

Billions of dollars in U.S. arms and economic assistance have helped make possible Indonesia's genocidal war and occupation of my homeland. This U.S. policy of complicity continued largely unchallenged until Nov. 12, 1991. On that date Indonesian soldiers fired upon a defenseless crowd of thousands of East Timorese pro-independence demonstrators at a cemetery, killing more than 250.

Indonesian soldiers armed with U.S. M-16 rifles shot and killed my good friend Domingos Segurado that day. He was the last member of his family; Indonesian soldiers had killed both his parents and all his siblings years earlier.

My wife, Gabriela, was also at the cemetery. She was in front of the cemetery gate, buried under a pile of bleeding bodies. Gabriela was almost seven months pregnant with our son, but somehow she escaped by scaling the cemetery wall.

Video footage by Western journalists and eyewitness accounts of the massacre created an international uproar and led to a great increase in grass-roots and govern-

mental activism around East Timor, including in the United States. As a result, Congress eliminated International Military Education and Training (IMET) funds to Indonesia in 1992.

Pressure from the Clinton administration and Indonesia's corporate allies, however, led Congress to reinstate a form of IMET restricted to classroom training on non-lethal matters. Nevertheless, public and congressional efforts to end U.S. support for Indonesia's military have been growing.

The resulting pressure compelled the State Department to ban small arms sales to Indonesia, later adding helicopter-mounted weaponry and armored personnel carriers to the ban. And last year Congress passed legislation prohibiting sales of any weapons to Indonesia that Jakarta cannot ensure will not be employed in East Timor.

But an article by journalist Allan Nairn published in the March 30 issue of the *Nation* magazine has revealed that the Clinton administration has circumvented the intent of Congress and provided lethal training to Indonesia's military. At least 28 training exercises have taken place since 1992 through the Pentagon's Joint Combined Exchange Training program.

The primary beneficiary of these programs has been the Kopassus, Indonesia's special forces troops responsible for many of the worst human rights violations in East Timor, including torture, extrajudicial executions and "disappearances."

U.S. officials often defend such training on the grounds that it helps create greater respect for human rights among Indonesian soldiers. But it is hard to take such claims seriously. Indeed, the current Indonesian military commander in East Timor, Col. Slamet Sidabutar, is a beneficiary of U.S. training.

According to East Timorese Catholic Bishop Carlos Belo—who, along with diplomat Jose Ramos Horta, won the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to bring peace to East Timor—the human rights situation in the occupied country has only worsened during the past year.

Despite the hardships the East Timorese people continue to experience, we take heart in the efforts of countless ordinary Americans and many members of Congress to end U.S. complicity with Indonesia's brutal occupation of our homeland. Such support gives us confidence that we will someday be able to realize our human right to self-determination.

Such efforts must intensify. Given the current economic and political crisis in Indonesia, now is the time for the Clinton administration to change policy and end U.S. support for Indonesia's brutal occupation of East Timor. Ending all U.S. training of Indonesia's military would be a step in the right direction.

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The writer represents the National Council of Maubere (East Timorese) Resistance in the United States and at the United Nations.